I Believe . . . The Father Almighty
Mark 14:32-42
March 9, 1969

Once a week, every Sunday, we stand together and confess our common faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed. We say "I believe in God the Father Almighty" Many of us have done it for years with monotonous regularity and one of the by-products of this ritualistic regularity has been a loss of whatever the words once were intended to mean. That is, what was once a meaningful ritual has become a meaningless procedure with no connection whatever with the realities of our daily living. What does it mean to confess belief in a God who is an Almighty Father?

In one evening last week I was involved in two experiences - just an hour apart, one of which strongly confirmed and witnessed to the Almighty Fatherhood of God; the other one of which seemed to utterly and totally destroy it. Let me explain. Before I left home for an 8:00 o'clock meeting, I attended to one of the pleasant duties of my own fatherhood - the bedtime ritual of two sleepy little boys. They had made small prayer books in their Church School Class and part of the ritual is to get those books out and say the prayer which they have memorized. One of them concludes something like this, ". . . and God will watch and care for me. Thank you God. Amen." It's a mighty affirmation which I believe more deeply in that moment than at any other time. Two sleepy little boys, clean, well fed, content, secure. As they say their prayers it's not difficult at all to believe in God the Father Almighty.

But the evening was not over. As I left the meeting on the South Side, a young boy about seven years old darted out into the street and was hit by a passing car. I was the first one to him. Crumpled, motionless in the unnecessary filth of South Third Street, dirty clothes - as I leaned over him I saw the two at home: "And God will watch and care for me. Thank you, God." What about this one? Thanks for what? His uncaring mother had to be ordered by the police to accompany him to the hospital in the ambulance. Is God an Almighty Father only to clean, white, middle class boys? What about this little boy?

That, I believe, is the issue contained in the rote, weekly affirmation. "I believe in God the Father Almighty." And I think every one of us has confronted that issue at some time, in some form in our own lives. Perhaps the war in Viet Nam, perhaps the millions of starving children in the world, perhaps the premature loss of someone very dear, perhaps the endless succession of monotonous days, devoid of joy and grace - leading nowhere. What does it mean - in the midst of life's terrible ambiguities - to believe in a God who is an Almighty Father?

The whole idea that God can be described as a father - in terms of fatherhood - is a uniquely Christian contribution. It is not necessarily logical; it is not the natural conclusion of a man who observes the world and other men and attempts to articulate a theology. The Greeks tried that and came up with a whole group of gods that acted pretty much like men. A typical Greek god was Prometheus - perhaps you know the story. Men had not yet discovered fire and without it were living in cold, damp discomfort. Prometheus, however, was a sympathetic god and decided to steal fire from the realm of heaven and give it to men. This he did, to the chagrin of Zeus, the father of all the gods. As punishment for his ill-advised behavior Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock in the middle of the ocean, and arranged for two vultures to tear out his liver which would grow again only to be torn out, over and over.

The gods of the Greeks acted like men, quarrelling among themselves, arbitrarily punishing and rewarding mortals according to the whim of the moment. For the most part they were withdrawn from and totally indifferent to the affairs of humanity.

Greek philosophy, on the other hand, conceived of God as an abstract idea. Plato, one of the greatest thinkers of all times, broke through the polytheism of his countrymen and taught that the ultimate reality of the unverse was a unity. There was one god, but the great philosopher could press his case no further than identifying God with the highest good. God remained an abstraction.

It is in the Old Testament, our own Judaic heritage that the word Father is whispered as the appropraite description of God. In the middle of the Pentateuch

we read: ". . . Is he not your father who created you, who made you and established you?" (deut. 32:6) In the book of the prophet Jeremiah (3:19) we find: "I am a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born." In th days of monarchy Israel's King was regarded as God's son. God's promise to David about Solomon was, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son." (2 Sam. 7:14)

But it remains a whisper in the Old Testament. God the father is primarily Jehovah (or Jahweh) who is totally other than man. His authority and power can be compared to a potter with a lump of shapeless clay in his hand. God is a father to be sure, but the idea is still a whisper.

Now, when we use the term father, we need to be clear that we are talking about at least two different concepts. The first may be called paternity. In this sense a man fathers his children: he is their progenitor, their creator, responsible for the fact that they have life. This idea has existed for centuries in many different religions. God is father in that he is the source of life - the creator. There is nothing uniquely Christian about that. And of course the idea does not include a personal relationship of any sort any more than the biological relationship resulting from conception always results in a relationship between father and child. Unhappily that is not always the result - outside of marriage - and within marriage as well.

The second idea adds a quality of personal relationship to the fact of biological relatedness -- and this we may call fatherhood as opposed to paternity. This is what the Christian faith has always intended when it calls God father. Certainly he is our creator but there is more to his fatherhood than that. There is a relationship, a very personal, intimate relationship between the creator and the created; a loving, caring, responsible relationship of fatherhood and sonship. That is distinctly and uniquely Christian.

Now where did we get it? We got it from one who addressed God as his father - from Jesus Christ. As Christians, thinking about the fatherhood of God we are compelled to start here -- with him - with the meaning and implications of his relationship with God.

Jesus called God father many times. He taught his disciples to pray "Our Father. . ." But nowhere did he refer to God as his father more movingly than in the Garden of Gethsemane. Nowhere is there an occasion which better illustrates what it means for any man to address God as father. Jesus had been betrayed: he had eaten his last meal with his friends: the coalition against him were, at that moment, searching for him in order to bring him to trial. It was a one way street and he knew it. At the end there would be humiliation, degradation public failure, torture and death. He said to his closest friends, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death: remain here and watch." And then in this terrible, agonizing moment he prayed: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee: remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." It is interesting that the Aramaic "Abba" is not translated. It is a term of deep intimacy: it indicates a close, loving relationship: it was the term used by little children in the family circle: the only equivalent we have is "Daddy" "Father" - "My father" another version translates it.

We must go to Gethsemane, I believe, if we want to understand the Fatherhood of God. For there we see the same issue raised by the little boy hit by a car -- or anyone of the terrible tragedies which daily call into question the very existence of God. James Smart has noted that when we call God "the Father Almighty", we usually mean that he is in "exclusive control of the heavenly buttons." That is, if he were an Almighty Father he wouldn't let things like that happen to his innocent children. That's the real issue, isn't it. That's the question that haunts us and bothers us and perhaps tortures us.

In Gethsemane Jesus asked his father to remove him for the situation in which he found himself. And his father - apparently did nothing. But there are limitations on fatherhood, are there not? If a man is going to be a father to his children he will not be a dictator: he will not pretend to determine their every decision: he will not try to protect them forever from exposure to the risks of life. Rather fatherhood is the loving but painful task of granting freedom; nurturing, teaching, supporting, and one day cutting loose. And that final freedom - the act of loosing the strings is the most difficult but most loving part of all.

Put another way, the Almighty Fatherhood of God is not a mechanical power that works to protect his children from harm. Rather it is a relationship that is broken by nothing: an intimate loving fatherhood that was with Jesus as he faced his cross - and which accompanies you and me and little boys hit by cars and grown men dying of cancer. It is a fatherhood of relationship that weeps when we weep - a love that is injured when we are hurt - a presence that laughs when we have reason for joy. It is a power far more profound than the mechanical arranging of events to protect and shield us. Gethsemane teaches us that.

What does it mean to call God Father? It means all of that and much more. It means for instance, that we are all brothers - not only by creation, but because of our common father's love for us. Here the doctrine takes on its inevitable moral implications. You can't call God father and hate another man, no matter who he is. The beautiful simplicity of that imperative was seen clearly by the early Christians One of them wrote," If a man says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar." (John 4:20) It's as simple as that, and yet Christians seem unanimously intent on ignoring it. Incredibly there seems to be no relationship between "I believe in God the Father" and the worst form of bigotry and racial prejudice. In fact, the latter negates the former. There is no belief in God the father that does not include a new relationship with my neighbor.

The dignity and worth of the individual, so threatened today and at many times in history, is defended ultimately here - here where we affirm the fatherhood of God. Leslie Newbigin tells how Adolf Hitler sent men to the famous Bethel Hspital to inform Pastor Bodelschwingh, its director, that the State could no longer afford to maintain hundreds of epileptics who were useless to society and only constituted a drain on scarce resources, and that orders had been issued to have them destroyed. Bodelschwingh confronted them in his room at the entrance to the hospital and fought a spiritual battle which eventually sent them away without having done what they were sent to do. He had no other weapon for that battle than the simple affirmation that these were men and women made in the image of God.." (p.62, Honest Religion for Secular Man)

Of course, there were millions for whom the battle was lost - but here is the final bastion. Here is the only final rationale for the still radical idea that every man is a person of dignity and worth and individuality. That's what it means to believe in a Father God.

There is much more, so much in fact, that it is presumptuous to attempt to cover it in one sermon. Forgiveness, love - these are words that have meaning for the Christian who believes in God the Father. Acceptance, comfort, ultimate security

There is one final idea, however, without which any work on God's fatherhood could not stand. That is, our Father God seeks us out until he find us; that his power over us is not mechanical coercion - but the power of an eternal love: that this love - this fatherhood is Almighty. It is an idea expressed in the parable of the Shepherd who seeks the one lost sheep until he finds it: or the widow looking for the one lost coin. It is echoed in the beautiful 139th Psalm, part of which we read together this morning. :"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

The Father seeks us - in many ways. He seeks us because he loves us and his Almightiness means that the search knows no end. Not even death separates us from the pursuing love of God. The Confession of 1967 reads: "God's sovereign love is a mystery beyond the reach of man's mind." St. Augustine, centuries ago, observed: "God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love." Jesus said simply, "Father".

Amen.